

CROSSING PERSPECTIVES

Public Space: spaces for all?

Van Daele Erik

Kuleuven

<https://lirias.kuleuven.be>; <http://www.uaps.net/>

erik.vandaele@isro.kuleuven

Abstract. A research by design on alternative open space in highly urbanised regions shows design as a process of (re)interpretation and reediting. The appropriation and spontaneous use of alternative spaces asks for a design of open signifiers; design that leaves margins and is open to disturbances, complexity, disorder and chaotic ambivalence. The design interest in the uncontrolled is shared with photography and the visual arts. By consulting the arts as a platform of contemplation designers better understand the potentials of alternative space and the force of the uncontrolled

Keywords. Dispersed urbanism; public space; alternative open space; design challenges; photography and visual arts

Alternative open spaces as free havens of public life

The quality of life in highly urbanised and dispersed regions, such as Flanders is determined by its open space structure. After all, one of the qualities of a dispersed urban constellation is the overall availability of accessible open space and its wide range of types of open spaces. In general the open space structure of a dispersed urban structure consists of two types of open space. There are the consolidated open spaces: large open spaces like nature reserves, agricultural fields, parks... spaces that are documented and for which policy plans are developed. But beside these consolidated spaces there are the more obscure open spaces: alternative spaces that are not documented and do not appear in policy plans. Spaces that were not designed as they're the by-product of a more dominant form of urbanism, open spaces that are the collateral damage of a regional logic in confrontation with local qualities: the impact of a new ring road, the rationalisation of a river, new large scale residential quarters... Most often these alternative spaces have a hybrid character as they're at the same time micro landscapes and urban or regional destinations. These open spaces are isolated fragments of the surrounding landscape that host urban programs. However these spaces look like neglected or derelict landscapes: the landscape is poor while the urban programs seem to be dumped into the vacant space as if there was no space for large-scale programs in the nearby small scale urban tissue.



Figure 1
the alternative space a combination of infrastructure, landscape fragments, urban destinations and regional events

Therefore they're at the same time part of the urban life as an urban destination and yet outside of the urban circuits as they're accessible but isolated by infrastructure. Being outside of the urban circuits they're uncontrolled spaces, open spaces that are appropriated by different social groups without one group dominating the space



Figure 2
the alternative spaces as a free haven of public life shared by different social groups

As such they're shared spaces and free havens of public life. The uncontrolled character and the spontaneous appropriation of the space confront any design for these open spaces with a paradox. If we want to value the spontaneous, uncontrolled use of these open spaces we know that it's impossible to design spontaneous use and we know that any design will alter the space. My exploration by design of hybrid (open)

contexts in Flanders is a way to answer these design challenges. The work and the reflection on hybrid contexts is based on design for four cases: Deinze, Fort Filip, Noordkasteel and Willebroek. (Van Daele. 2014)

Film, photography and visual arts

The interest in the character and potentials of these derelict spaces as atypical public spaces is not exclusively related to design: film, photography and visual arts share a similar interest in the alternative open spaces structure and in hybrid contexts. It is film and photography that incited the interest in these open spaces. Ignasi De Sola Morales' article *Terrain Vague* (De Sola Morales. 1995:118-123) is one of the articles that introduced, in the nineties, alternative open space in the design debate. However the article is based on explorations in the arts. The title of the article refers to the 1960 film *Terrain Vague* by Marcel Carné in which the life of young adults is set in an undefined open space at the edge of the Parisian banlieue, showing the terrain vague as a public space. (Ursprung. nd).



Figure 3
Still of the film Terrain Vague by Marcel Carné (1960) showing the alternative open space as public space

Furthermore part of the article is based on photographs by John Davies, David Plowden, Thomas Struth, Jannes Linders, Manolo Laguillo and Olivio Barbieri; photographs in which the potentials of the post-industrial European landscape are explored



Figure 4
John Davies Agecroft Power Station

Designers, however, abandoned this link with art, concentrating on understanding the design challenges and the role of design in the evolution of these uncontrolled spaces. Alternative space was identified as spandrels, stimdross, residual spaces, wasted spaces, happy fringes or vague parks, each term referring to a specific design aspect



Figure 5
Overview of the research by design on alternative space

Now that a design reflection on alternative open space has been developed it's worthwhile to again confront the design perspective with an artistic interpretation. Not only to better understand the role of alternative open spaces in the dispersed city but also to understand the specificity of the design perspective. Therefore I cross my exploration by design of hybrid contexts with the work of two artists: photographer Margot Dieleman and visual artist Lara Almarcegui. Margot Dieleman is a Belgian photographer who made, in parallel with my research on hybrid contexts, a photographic exploration of the same spaces. We worked separately only confronting our work at the end of the research, discussing the characteristics of alternative space. Dielemans calls her work: Micro elements Fluid reality in hybrid spaces and presents it as a series of thematic booklets like colour, lines, shadow, sky, water...



Figure 6
series of zoom by Margot Dieleman showing the dynamic of alternative space

Lara Almarcegui is a Spanish artist who investigates urban spaces that are peripheral to the city: abandoned spaces and structures in a process of transformation. Her work consists of demolitions, excavations, ruins but most important to the exploration of alternative open spaces: wastelands. She publishes guides on wastelands, provides public access to vacant lots that are normally fenced and preserves open spaces that lack any productive or constructive destiny.



Figure 7
Image in the guide to Sacca San Mattia by Lara Marcegui

Designing open signifiers

In the research by design it became clear that designers can value the potentials of alternative and hybrid contexts by designing spaces as open signifiers; spaces of which the relation signifier – signified has been blurred, spaces of which the functionality is unclear and thus open to interpretation and appropriation. This takes the form of designing strong urban figures based on weak residues.

To illustrate design based on weakness the case of Deinze is a rewarding example. Deinze is a small Flemish city between Ghent and Kortrijk. In the seventies the river Leie, that runs through the centre was rationalised and a new ring road bypassing the centre was added.



Figure 8

The Leie rationalised, a new road bypassing the centre and a landfill operation in Deinze

Both projects isolated part of the surrounding landscape, a landscape fragment of which the features were erased by a landfill operation. The result of these regional infrastructural projects was a flat, empty and vacant space at walking distance from the central market. Gradually the space filled with pioneer vegetation and as it was close to the centre the city used the vacant space to host a museum, a youth centre and a day-care centre making the vacant space into an urban destination, urban programs were added ad hoc without a long term vision. Furthermore, as it was a large open space the space was used for regional events: the VIP village of a national bike race, summer concerts, the end of the school year party... (figure 1). Apart from these official programs the inhabitants appropriated the vacant space and it became an uncontrolled public space characterised by spontaneous use. (figure 2) The city, however, keeps adding urban programs - they plan a new cultural and administrative centre- transforming the neglected space in a consolidated space: a park. The project for the future park is a collection of thematic gardens, developed by introducing external elements creating a controlled space that leaves little or no margin for spontaneous use.

My research by design is an alternative to the artificiality of the park and a search to find ways to value the space as uncontrolled free haven of public life.

In general the project is a combination of a water and grass landscape



Figure 9
The water and grasslandscape in Deinze

I make both landscapes extensive, consuming a maximum of open space. Furthermore I make them into productive landscapes, landscapes that produce for the city in the water management. In this way it becomes more difficult to fill the open space by adding programs.

Reading alternative space

The design process is a constant going back and forward between reading, interpreting and creating. The project for Deinze is based on the qualities and characteristics of the site. In order to understand the vocation of the space different media are used: a superposition of historic maps models of the topography, sections showing the density of plants, historic photographs, plans of the transition between public space and private built space...

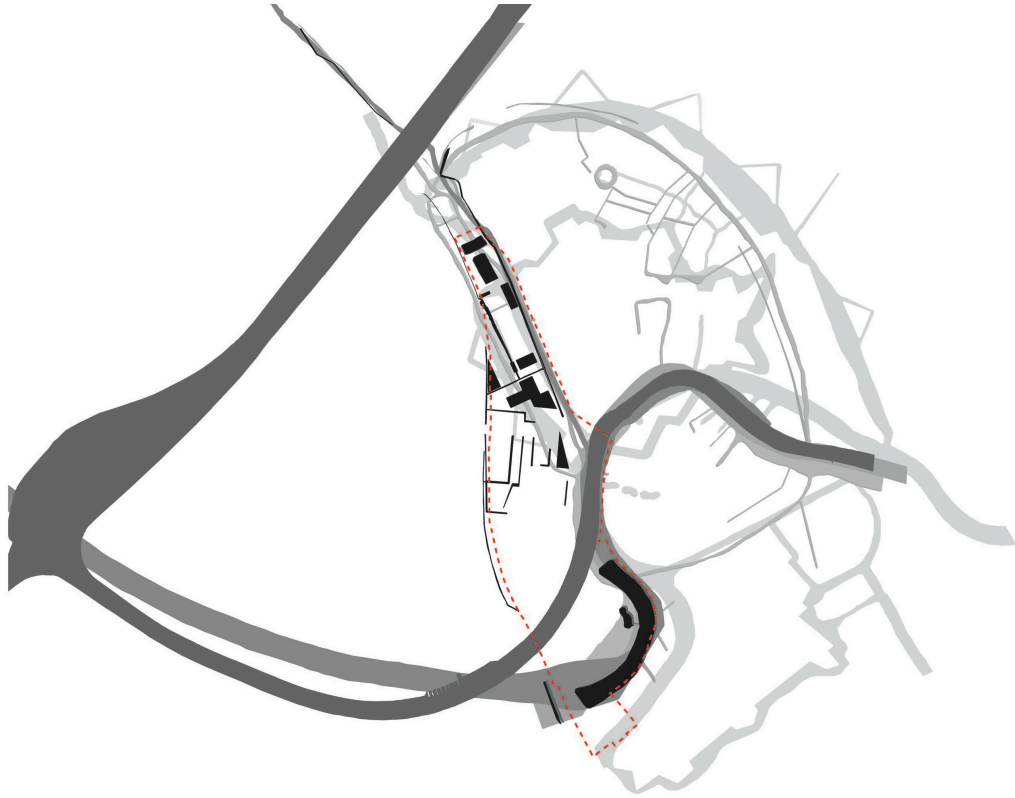


Figure 10
Superposition of the historic and future water structures in Deinze

The analyses show the space in Deinze as a waterscape. The space was part of the Flemish valley, more specific part of the Leie valley. In 1694 the water structure of the space was such a strong urban form that it not only dominated the space itself but the whole form of the city. However, at the moment, this water structure is reduced to some traces, lines and scars

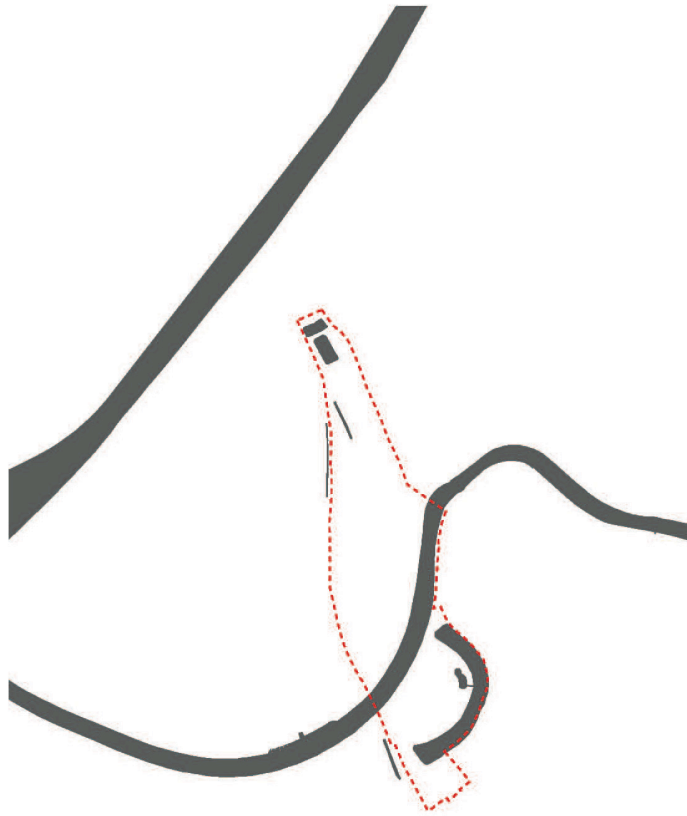


Figure 11
The weak residues of the water structure

They're weak elements, weak in the sense that the once important waterscape, both natural and artificial, no longer determines the character and vocation of the space. This weak spatial character contributes to the perception that the space is neglected and derelict. But it's this weakness that opens up the space and makes it into a space full of hope and promise. It makes these open spaces into open signifiers because, as they're weakly signified and as their consistent elements are weak residues, they're open to (re)interpretation. In the new waterscape of Deinze I pick up the weak water elements and reinterpret them into new spatial configurations, into new strong urban forms. Design becomes a process of reediting the cut-up text of the alternative open space; a reedit of the tension between nature and culture rather than design as an act of invention

Dielemans photographs confirm the importance of these weak, small elements (figure 6). By framing and zooming, her photographs reveal details and qualities that, as they're so small and weak, normally escape our attention. She shows collections of microelements in which the Flemish alternative open space is not the landscape of the great figures like Davies' British landscapes but a fragmented collection of interesting details. Also the work by Almarcegui is characterised by the search for the invisible traits and characteristics of urban space helping us to see the complexity of urban transformations, to see the way economy, history and individual biographies are made manifest in the terrain (Urspring, nd). Like the design analysis, her wasteland guides, for example the guide to the Venetian deserted island of Sacca San Mattia, is based on historical, geographical, ecological and political data and helps us to understand the role and quality of the island in the Venetian lagoon. Just as in the designs Almarcegui considers the sites as revelations of possibilities; the possibility that things can be different as they are at the moment, the possibility to make people take note of the fact

that there are alternatives to the known – in design terms consolidated- spaces (Zayand).

What about humans?

Yet an important aspect of the design research is the observation of the inhabitants. Observing what people do in the open space is one of the basic elements to the design and to understanding the social role of alternative landscape. The observations are not used to literally translate them into spatial elements, but “temporary use already contains clues to the potential diversity of future activities”. (Kamvasinou. 2006). Based on my observations I introduce a sequence of spaces going from intimate to large open spaces, using plants, grass and water

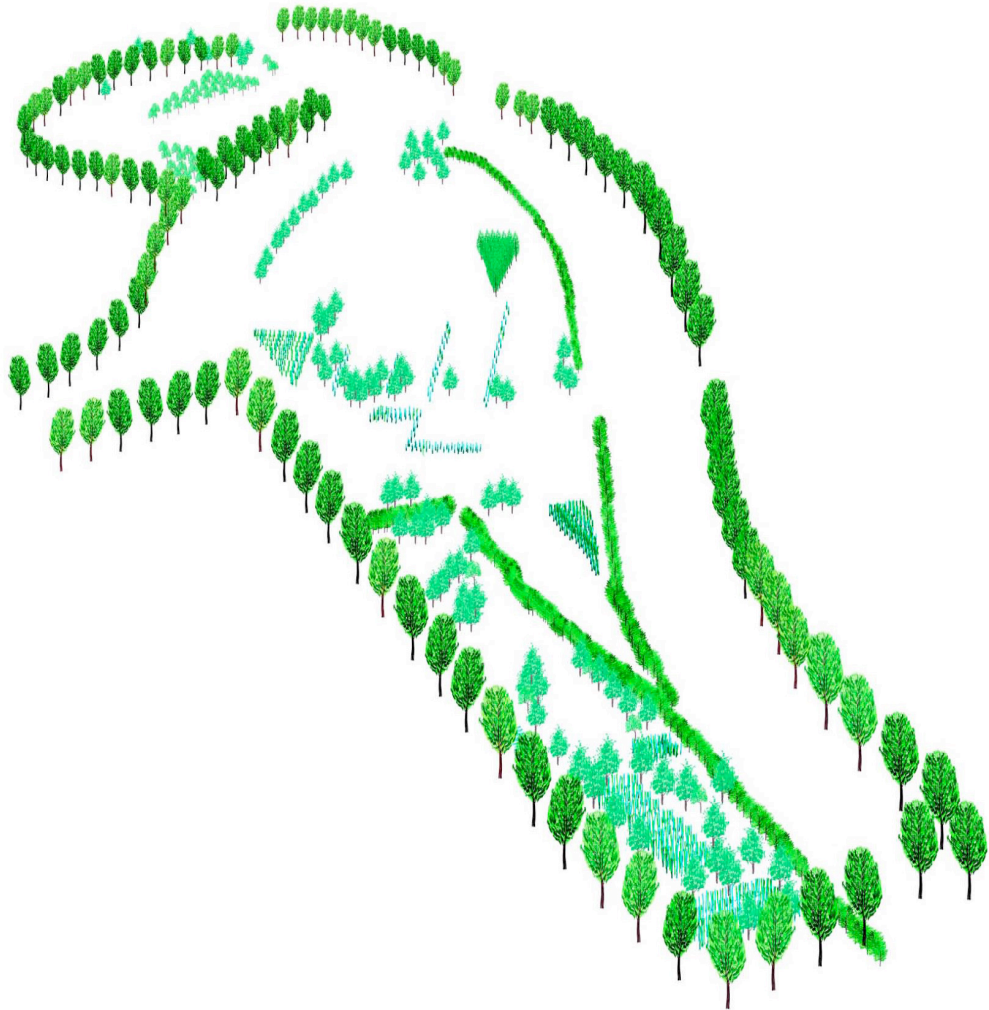


Figure 12
A sequens of intimate and large scale spaces

In contrast humans are only indirectly involved in the art projects. In photography, both in Dielmans work as in the work by the photographers mentioned by De Sola Morales, human interaction is secondary. In Dielemans work human presence is only suggested in the traces they left behind: tyre marks, technical installations, a lamp, a sign... In Davies Agecroft power station photograph (figure 4) the landscape and the post-industrial infrastructure dominate the image. Only by exploring the image in detail one detects a soccer field with players the size of an ant. Also Almarcegui involves people indirectly: her demolitions are public events (Rotterdam 1999), she

invites people to occupy and appropriate the hidden sites she opens up (Brussels 2002, Trento 2006, The Hague 2008) and she stimulates people to explore the wastelands she describes in her guides (Amsterdam 1999, Sao Paulo 2006, Shenzhen river 2008, Rotterdam 2009 and the Olympic sites in London and Rome). And yet human interaction seems secondary as her work seems to be an exploration of the process of transformation or transition itself; a reflection on the ephemeral character of urban conditions rather than a research on the social and cultural role of these transitional spaces.

In contrast the inhabitant or user is by definition the basis of design. Humans cannot be secondary in the design approach, as every design is meant to offer a surplus value to urban life. That brings us inevitably to the design paradox concerning spontaneous use. Although we cannot design spontaneous use we can incite or afford it by designing open signifiers. In the designs of the research I introduce an interpretation of archetypical landscape of which the form does not determine the use: the meadow (in Deinze), the beach, the forest, the dike... Furthermore I add silent forms, abstract elements of which the signifier is unclear; forms that work like strategic beacons in the landscape. In Deinze a series of large-scale beams and a punctuated mineral plane demark, like a Carl Andre installation, the space .

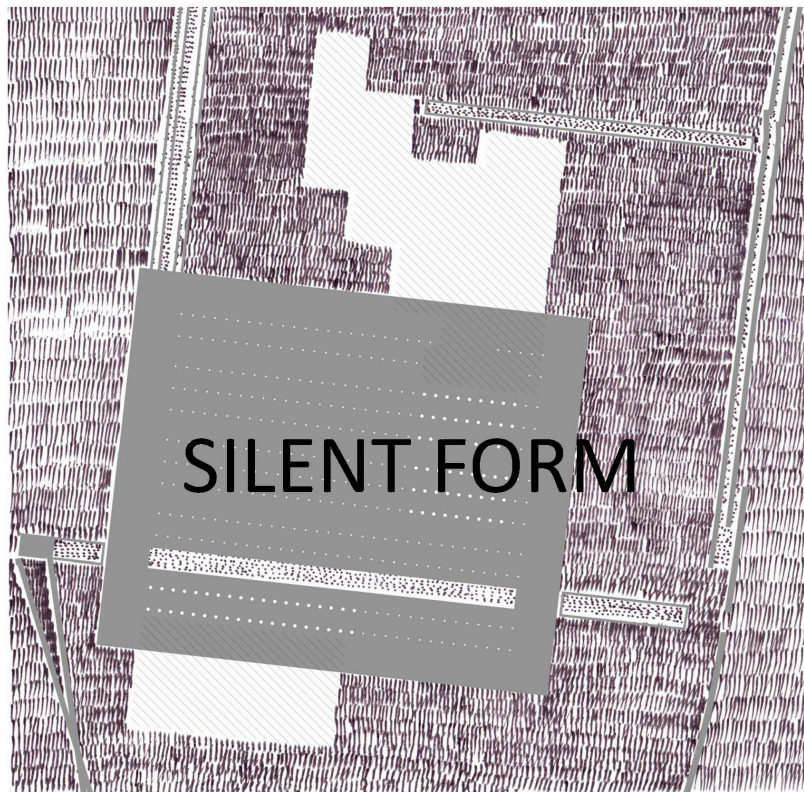


Figure 13
a perforated plane as silent form

If we want to value spontaneous use and if we want to value the site as a free haven of public life we have to organise the space without controlling it, we have to value complexity, ambivalence, disturbance, antagonisms and accidents. At the same time we should ask ourselves whether and when design is needed in valuing spontaneity and appropriation. As most of these alternative open spaces already function as uncontrolled public space they're better left alone and don't need design. Other spaces

have a temporary use. They're in a three-field system: industrial – vacant – urban (Oswalt, P. Overmeyer, K. Misselwitz, 2013) temporarily used while waiting for a new future. Here design is important but secondary, affording the temporary use but not determining the future status of the space. In contrast design is essential in cases like Deinze where the alternative space becomes a consolidated space.

A shared interest

The selective use of design and the fact that a designer shows an interest in complexity and chaotic ambivalence is not the way the arts, especially the visual arts, perceive design. The art critics Octavio Zaya, Cuauhtémoc Medina and Philip Ursprung commenting Almarceguis work (Zoya. nd) put art and design in contradiction to each other. They state that design vindicates the space. They see design as an instrument of demarcation, organization and control, an instrument for colonization, imposing limits, order and form, a way to erase all disorderly elements, imposing a silence on the multitudes. They relate the work of Almarcegui to the anarchitecture of Gordon Mata Clarck. Anarchitecture is the combination of architecture and anarchy, considering the artwork as the antagonist of architecture (design) as it expresses disorderliness, disorder and indecisiveness; terms design wishes to abolish (Cuauhtemoc. nd). With his anarchitecture Gordon Matta Clarck looked somewhat pitying at architectures (design) ambition to make a contribution to society through built structures.

Indeed I intervene in Deinze in order to develop a new type of open space for the local society. I imagine how a future spatial configuration can strengthen the social and cultural role of the actual alternative space. Therefore design works in the future, imagining the future spatial lay-out, the role of the open space, the way it might function... knowing that the imagined project will not be the final one. In contrast Dielemans photographs work by definition in the past. Once the photograph is taken the work shows a moment in the past, documenting the way the alternative space looked at a certain moment in time. As Dielemans photographed the alternative open space over a period of three years her thematic series of the same spaces at different moments show the complexity of the urban transformations and the dynamic character of these spaces. In her work Almarcegui does not create spaces but augments the space thus pushing us to consider their meaning and significance. She uses drastic transformations to transform our perception of wastelands and deserted spaces (Zaya. nd). Like the photographs her work emphasises the temporary, the transitory and the dynamic character of urban space.

Design, photography and the visual arts share an interest in the dynamic character and the potentials of the alternative open spaces, but as designer one starts to wonder if the where question in the arts does not push away the when and for whom? In design, photography and visual arts the works are an exploration of the identity of the open space but to designers it seems that the interest in the arts is limited to this revealing capacity. The artwork is a narrative that ends up being interposed between reality and its mere potential (Cuauhtemoc. nd), in such a way that the work seems to get stuck in its fascination for potentials without questioning what to do with these potentials.

Furthermore this fascination with potentiality leads to a conservative attitude. De Sola Morales already noted that the photographs of the alternative landscape are essentially an aesthetic approach of the derelict landscapes (De Sola Morales. 1995). Also Dielemans photographs are aesthetic zooms of aspects of the alternative space, suggesting that the space shouldn't be altered. Almarcegui is even clearer, she states: "I prefer to leave possibilities open which is why I protect open spaces and don't do anything in them" (Zaya. nd). Therefore she literally protects alternative landscape: she legally protected a wasteland in Genk from 2004 till 2016, with the underlying idea that the space shouldn't have been ruined in the first place. In one way or another

this is in contrast with the fact that both photography and visual arts focus on the ephemeral character of these spaces, on the artists fascination for the urban dynamics as their work seems to be a plead to keep the alternative landscape as it is. In contrast design plays on the evolution of the alternative open spaces by imagining the next phase.

At the same time the functionality of design is a block for designers to explore the potentials and identity of alternative open space. Every design decision is based on a function; on the way it might serve a public. In this way the beams in Deinze are on seating height and the punctuations of the mineral plane follow more or less a parking grid. Freed from this functional aspect the artists have the opportunity, more than the designer, to reflect on the essence of the alternative landscape. Both Dielemans and Almarcegui emphasise and explore the idea of the residue: that what is left behind, the ephemeral situation of the open space, the poetic value of the wastelands, the role of temporality...

Design should consult the art reflection and look at art as a platform of contemplation. Art shares with design the interest and importance of alternative open space but at the same time they confront design with the question whether our open spaces are only meaningful to us in their functionality. And the idea of reducing design to functionality is exactly what my exploration of designing open signifiers tries to tackle.

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